

辛其氏：紅格子酒舖

*The Red Chequers Pub: excerpts*

By Xin Qi Shi

Translated by Cathy POON

*Editor's Note*

*The Red Chequers Pub* traces the experience of a small group of friends from the early 1970s, when they participated in Hong Kong's Protect Diaoyu Islands Campaign, to the early 1990s, when they had to make major decisions about their future because of the 1989 democracy movement in China and its aftermath.

The Protect Diaoyu Islands Campaign marked the first significant public demonstration of nationalistic feelings in Hong Kong. The majority of its core members were young men and women, university and secondary school students, many of whom were arrested by the Hong Kong government as rioters. It was a movement which forged the destiny of many of its participants who are now in their mid- to late-forties. The million-person demonstrations of May and early June 1989 in support of the democracy movement in China were another major landmark in the making of Hong Kong's social and political identity. Xin Qi Shi sets her characters against this overshadowing backdrop, yet manages to highlight their lives as individuals. In doing so, she endows their private joys and sorrows with a potency which far exceeds the limits of individual experience.

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Everyone in the van was quiet as they strained to hear the radio. Lap Mui recognized Tan Ying's voice almost at once. Before Tan Ying was promoted to her present post as producer of news programmes, Lap Mui was able to hear her news reports at seven every evening in the public light bus on her way home from work. Although they seldom saw each other, Lap Mui seemed to know everything that Tan Ying did. Tan Ying was all over town—Tan Ying at Legco,<sup>1</sup> Tan Ying at the scene of a robbery at the Kowloon City branch of Chow Sang Sang Jewellery, Tan Ying at Colvin House,<sup>2</sup> Tan Ying at a press conference of the Sino-British Land Commission, Tan Ying at the Guangzhou Spring Trade Fair, Tan Ying in front of the British Embassy in Beijing . . . . Through the radio, Lap Mui came to know about her friend's rich and full life as a reporter, and she felt a warm glow. When Tan Ying was duly rewarded for her outstanding performance and heavy workload by being promoted to the post of producer, Lap Mui was no longer able to hear her firm and candid voice on the air. So Lap Mui little expected to meet her over the airwaves again during these sweltering and turbulent days, bringing up close the distant news of the student movement. Though excited, she was also worried, not just for the students, but also for her friend. Tan Ying, who had been away from the frontline of news-reporting for quite a while since her promotion, must have had her reasons for going to Beijing. Lap Mui was later told by Lee Sheung Yee that it was because the station was under-staffed, with one colleague suddenly taken ill and hospitalized and another resigning to emigrate. However, Lap Mui and Yip Ping were convinced that it was with a sense of mission that Tan Ying went to do her reporting, humbly yet proudly, on Beijing's Chang'an Avenue around the time that Li Peng declared martial law.

Tan Ying said nothing about this episode afterwards, not even at the Christmas gathering that year. Everyone took great care not to touch upon the nightmare of June Fourth. Instead, the hot topic of the evening was emigration possibilities. They spread out the maps and tried to find the exact locations of the Caribbean countries, the small South American states and the Tongan islands which were being peddled in the newspapers, discussing with great animation questions of race and weather, what it must be like living on a staple of bananas, and where one could go to learn Spanish in Hong Kong. The conclusion, a big letdown, was that it would not be easy. Tan Ying ended the night's dreary discussion in her usual witty way: "Qinghua University may be big, but it has no room for a quiet desk;<sup>3</sup> this world of ours may

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<sup>1</sup>Legislative Council.

<sup>2</sup>The building where the Chinese and British teams met to discuss the details of the hand-over of Hong Kong.

<sup>3</sup>A famous quote from one of the student declarations of 1989.

be vast, but it has no room for an ordinary person like me.” This was the closest anyone came to broaching the subject of the student movement that evening. Lap Mui sometimes thought: Yip Ping is an open book and one can tell at a glance whether she is happy or not; Shing Ya is a jade statuette of Bodhisattva Guanyin, her serene appearance seemingly untouched by worldly pleasures and sorrows; but Tan Ying, who has in all these years tried her best to show her friends her cheerful side, keeps her innermost feelings well concealed. The events which took place in Beijing in the latter half of May 1989 were destined to be with Tan Ying the rest of her life and would never be forgotten. Perhaps she would go back to that chapter again to share her shock and pain with her friends when the time was right. Lap Mui was certain she would.

This conviction was strengthened later at a get-together in a pub when, out of the blue, Tan Ying suddenly asked, “Do you ever think of Chiu Man Kam?” Lap Mui moved the Bloody Mary which sat before her, smiling and shaking her head. “I sometimes do, but only with resentment. I resent the heartless way he treated

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**Josiah LEUNG** 梁耀輝

*At the Bar*, 1993.

*The Metropolis: Visual Research into Contemporary Hong Kong 1990-1996.*

Lap Mui in front of the Red Chequers that night at the end of 1972.” Tan Ying glanced at Yip Ping and gulped down some wine before continuing, “Perhaps you girls don’t know this, but I was very fond of Man Kam in those days. He did his best to avoid me because of Lap Mui, and that was very painful.” Tan Ying’s voice was calm and her oval eyes looked misty, but both Yip Ping and Lap Mui were shocked. Yip Ping was stunned by the fact that Tan Ying was able to lay bare her secrets after twenty years as if they were nothing. As for Lap Mui, her shock was beyond description, not because Tan Ying was sweet on Man Kam, but at the realization that love could make a person so blind. She was sharing a room with Tan Ying in those days. Every time Man Kam came to visit, Tan Ying would leave. It never occurred to her that the frail creature was strong enough to quietly drain the cup of bitterness all by herself. Lap Mui had been so busy licking her own wounds that she had been oblivious to Tan Ying’s wounds, which were probably deeper than her own. If Man Kam was indeed heartless, then she, Lap Mui, was just as bad. She remembered those days when she was like a lost soul, and how Tan Ying would hurry back from work to their Sai Wan Ho flat to keep her company. In order to cheer her up, Tan Ying had dragged her to the Henry Cheung Dance Studio for lessons in ballroom dancing. A picture showing them doing the cha-cha was taken and sent to Yip Ping and Shing Ya, who were then away in France. After all these years, as Tan Ying finally lay bare her heart at the pub, Lap Mui felt no grudge, only gratitude. She had well and truly let her friend down. Man Kam’s face had become blurred, but the friendship between Tan Ying and Lap Mui remained real and tangible. Leaning back on the leather couch in the pub, candle light flickering, they listened in silence to the pianist playing ‘Fiddler on the Roof’.

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Yip Ping was standing ankle-deep in water. She stood with mixed feelings in this sea of people. In bygone years she had come to Victoria Park to commemorate the July 7th Marco Polo Bridge Incident and to stand up for China’s sacred territorial claims to the Diaoyu Islands. Today she once again stood facing the wind-swept refreshments kiosk, this time to voice support for the democratic movement in Beijing and opposition to military control and martial law. The Diaoyu Islands Incident which had had such an absolute and unyielding place in her life had not had a happy ending. Now, dispirited after numerous setbacks in life, would she be repeating her fate as she dragged her weary feet to this same place to voice her opinions? Yip Ping looked at the crowd around her. They were raising their fists resolutely, shouting angrily, and gulping down rage together with the rain drops. They had all folded their umbrellas in spite of the wind and rain in order not to block the view of others.

People were standing close to one another and trying to move as close to the kiosk as possible. From a distance, Yip Ping saw Chiu Tze Chung, who had been quiet for many years after the Diaoyu Islands movement, leading the crowd in chanting slogans. He had turned into a bald middle-aged man. Time and tide waited for no man. Who would have thought that they would meet again under such circumstances, brought together through the televised address by Li Peng in the early morning of 20 May 1989 denouncing the student movement in Beijing as 'turmoil'. Chiu Tze Chung had studied in England and France, become a movie director after returning to Hong Kong, got married and later divorced. Although their experiences had all been very different and although she was no longer so young at heart, Yip Ping still longed to see friends from those days. Cold and shivering, she searched hard in the crowd, her heart warming when she saw a familiar face. Yip Ping had come to this park with Lap Mui once to look at the decorated lanterns during Mid-Autumn Festival. They just followed the crowd in and followed the crowd out. The atmosphere was jolly, but that was all she could remember. She had not been back to the park since then. She rarely brought her child here, either. She was numbed by the mad rush of life. The past was locked away in the deepest corners of her memory, and she didn't even have time to bring it out for a bit of sun once in a while. She had doubts as to whether she still had any dreams or hopes, whether she still cared about justice in this world. The passion of youth was gone forever, and nothing but dryness and dullness remained. However, since 15 April 1989, pictures of China by night and by day had been constantly before her eyes. She wrote to Mang Chin Leung in Australia: "I am surprised to find that there is still a bit of heat and light in this withered soul of mine. I must do something for this movement. You may laugh at me, knowing that I can only help in small matters, and that even so, I'm always petrified of making mistakes." Yip Ping had more than once quietly closed the door behind her, leaving her husband and daughter at home as she went out alone to distribute leaflets, stick up posters and take part in sit-ins and demonstrations in the pouring rain. She was really glad she had come today. At this particular moment in history, there was a closeness, and what's more power, in people's relations. In this vast universe, here they were, men and women standing solemnly in the park, braving the wind and rain, with only one thought in mind. Yip Ping thought sadly to herself: Never before have I had such a wonderful feeling about this city. Will I ever have such a feeling again?

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Chiu Lai Ha was sitting under the Clock Tower of the old railway station built in 1916, waiting for Lap Mui. The Tsim Sha Tsui which had appeared more than

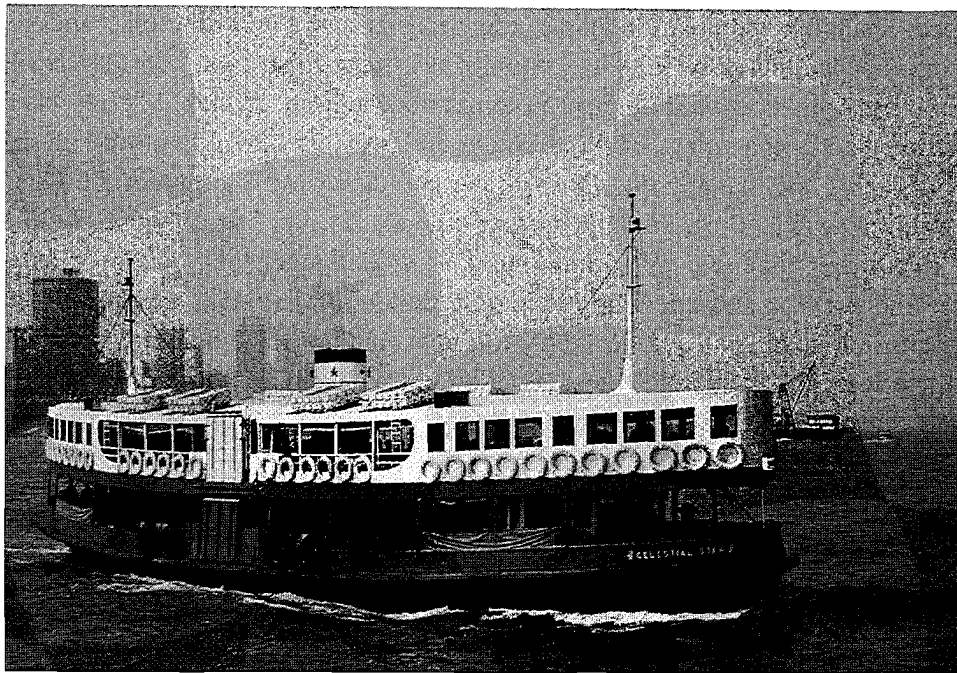


Clock Tower in Tsim Sha Tsui.  
Photograph by the editors.

once in her dreams during the past fifteen years had changed beyond recognition in many places. The waterfront looked completely different. The Cultural Centre and the mock-Roman fountain plaza, the newly-built Hong Kong Museum of Art with the huge banner advertising an exhibition of Rodin sculptures hanging down its façade, as well as the dome-shaped Space Museum gave Chiu Lai Ha a feeling of being in a strange city. Indeed, when a person returns to her old home after some time, even if she does not lose her way in the physical environment, she is bound to go astray tracing her steps down memory lane, and needs time to bring herself back to the real world. In the new cultural complex along the Tsim Sha Tsui promenade, the only familiar sight was the Clock Tower. When, as a child, she was making one of those trips back to the home-village with her mother, she stood hanging on to the bags which her mother carried on a pole over her shoulders, still half asleep as they tried to catch the first train. Anxiously queueing in front of the barrier in the hall of the railway station, she never paid any attention to this unremarkable clock tower. Who would have thought that it would have been preserved in this city which never did much to protect any cultural relics, becoming as it has a landmark of the place, reflecting the miraculous evolution of this little island from a fishing village a hundred years ago to the international metropolis it

is today?

As Tan Ying and Yip Ping both had to work into the evening, they had arranged to have a late dinner, and Lap Mui and Lai Ha took the opportunity to meet up at the Roman fountain plaza first for a little tête-à-tête on the stone benches there. In the gentle sea breeze, people were leaning over the sea-wall, fishing, while lovers held each other, whispering. With the setting of the sun, Victoria Harbour had shed its shimmering scales and turned to a dark swell. Traffic was busy, with tugs, fishing boats, container-lighters, brightly-lit pleasure cruisers, and the shuttling Star ferries all competing for space in this harbour of amazing vitality, while a deep-draught ocean-liner sat quietly moored next to the Ocean Terminal. The neon signs on the island were already lit up. Against the backdrop of the night sky, the lights climbing in iridescent contours up to Victoria Peak seem like diamonds scattered over black velvet. Chiu Lai Ha exclaimed in wonder, "Hong Kong at night is really so beautiful." Lap Mui nodded in agreement. She had seen an unimpeded Atlantic sunset on the waterfront promenade in Lisbon and sailed from Europe to Asia across the Bosphorus in Turkey many years ago, but to her, the sun setting over Victoria Harbour, red like the yolk of a salted egg, was the most beautiful sight of all.



Star Ferry.  
Photograph by the editors.

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Shing Ya's old house on Tak Shing Street had been pulled down a long time ago. The old premises of the Red Chequers Pub on Tak Hing Street just round the corner, together with three adjacent ground-floor shops and the first floors of these units had been turned into the Wish-Come-True Restaurant, a famous upmarket eatery 'specializing in southern Chinese cuisine'. The quiet and nondescript little alley of more than twenty years ago had since become a prosperous and bustling place. Lap Mui had been to this restaurant not long ago when the Trade Development Council threw a banquet in honour of the visiting Liaoning Industrial Delegation. Although not a trace of the Red Chequers remained, the moment she walked into the lobby and stepped onto the marble stairway leading to the first floor, she seemed to feel the caress of a warm breeze on her face, bringing the past to mind. Lap Mui sat spellbound in the elegant side-room, with its frosted glass windows and window frames carved with plants of the four seasons—plum, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo. A foreigner looking for the Dragon Room came to the Peony Room by mistake. As soon as he walked in, Lap Mui almost jumped. She thought it was Pierre, the French proprietor of the Red Chequers, standing before her. She laughed to herself from behind the array of dinner dishes and wine glasses. She drank the warmed Shaoxing rice wine and ate king prawns and fish with lotus and cassia dressing, not the red or white wine, onion rings, french fries and fish fingers of the pub in those bygone days. Lap Mui no longer touched any of these Western snacks, and rarely had even a glass of wine. Since her bouts of stomach trouble in recent years, she only took small sips when wining and dining with guests of the Council. She was unlike Yip Ping. In her youth, Yip Ping got drunk every time she drank, and cried every time she got drunk. Now, in middle-age, the situation was even worse. She got sick and threw up every time she drank. Lap Mui told her to submit to the physiological laws and not to try to prove anything. She would give her word when she was suffering from the adverse effects of alcohol, but would slip back to her old ways soon afterwards. Lap Mui let her have her way, knowing how she enjoyed the slow drift from sobriety to intoxication. When they were young and having a drink and a chat at the Red Chequers, there was such harmony and warmth, though they were not aware of it at the time. But now, looking back, she knew things would never be the same again. The room was brightly lit by the huge rosewood lantern lamps hanging down from the caisson ceiling, quite a sharp contrast with the subdued lighting of the Red Chequers as she remembered it. The seating booths, the impressionist paintings, the dart-board, the red candle-stands fashioned from empty wine bottles, the curtains of wax-printed cotton hand-woven by Zimbabwean natives, and the folk songs of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez had all



disappeared into the tunnel of time. In their place were horizontal panels of flowing calligraphy, dedication inscriptions and couplets, shrimps painted by Qi Baishi and horses by Xu Beihong, finely-crafted rosewood furniture, an exquisite double-sided embroidered screen, and string and woodwind Chinese music. For a while Lap Mui was lost. In a trance, she had slipped unknowingly from one world back into another.

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After June 4th, 1989, many of those journalists who had gone north with Tan Ying to cover the events in Beijing left the territory to settle abroad. There was a drain on radio stations, television stations and newspapers alike, and this was followed by job swaps on a massive scale in the media. Then came the advent of satellite television. Head-hunting intensified, and wages and positions offered improved accordingly. Tan Ying decided to cope with these shifting events by remaining at Metro Radio and throwing herself into her work, and within two years was promoted to the post of controller, in charge of all current affairs and news programmes. She had at first been very cautious about emigration, but being unable to say no to urging by well-meaning relatives and friends, she submitted an application on a wait-and-see basis, being aware that fellow journalists were not doing too well since moving abroad. Since her job was one where she could obtain first-hand information on politics and people's livelihood on the mainland, she was sometimes full of hopes for China and at other times beset by doubt. When the immigration visa finally came through, she could not make up her mind whether to go or to stay, and was really in a dilemma. She could not foresee that the decision for her and Lee Sheung Yee to leave, something over which she had agonized for so long, would be so easily made by the confiscation of film footage in the autumn of 1993.

Lee Sheung Yee had set up a production company with some friends to produce Asian information programmes for local and foreign television stations. It sometimes also produced dramas for small independent companies. In the summer of 1992, Sheung Yee was working with a German news agency to produce a documentary in China entitled *Three Years On*, which covered a wide range of topics such as people's state of mind, economic development, and political ambience in different places in China after 1989. Shooting was to be done in about a dozen provinces and cities from south to north. The Germans had already been negotiating with the Chinese government for a year. Since the production team was working with a skeleton staff on a shoe-string budget, and in order to avoid language problems, a Chinese sub-contractor had been sought in Hong Kong. This was the most challenging offer the company had had since its founding, and Lee Sheung Yee was confident that they could overcome the difficulties. Together with the executive producer sent

from the German news agency and three other employees from his company, Lee had been working since late summer 1992 with cadres assigned by the Chinese authorities as liaison and coordination personnel. Shooting on the mainland had proceeded fairly smoothly and progress had been generally satisfactory. In the latter stage of the shooting, however, they ran into bad luck. First a member of the team had fallen from a high platform and had injured his neck, and then Lee Sheung Yee contracted typhoid and had to spend two weeks in Nanjing Hospital. These events came on top of the endless little irritations in the form of government requests for revisions and to check the rushes. When production was nearly finished in the autumn of 1993, just three days before the production team was to pack up and return south, Lee Sheung Yee and the German producer were on their way back to the hotel on Chang'an Avenue at dusk when he saw someone handing out leaflets in Tiananmen Square. As if by instinct, Lee Sheung Yee raised his camera to shoot the scene. Suddenly several plain-clothes public security officers rushed out from the crowd and attempted to remove the film and confiscate the video camera. After the scuffle, the public security officers let the German go but took Lee Sheung Yee into custody. Subsequently their colleagues sought everywhere for help. They sought assistance from the British consulate but got nowhere. The Germans tried to negotiate through the German consulate and submitted the document covered with official seals giving permission to film, but still got nowhere. Tan Ying also hurried up to Beijing from Hong Kong. After two weeks, by which time they were all at the end of their tether, Lee Sheung Yee was released after writing a statement of contrition.

Tan Ying had been disheartened since then. Both she herself and Sheung Yee worked in the sensitive media business, the forecast for which was not optimistic. She had told Lap Mui that she did not want to leave China, and did not want to leave Hong Kong and her friends, but she had to give her child a future. She knew that their departure would change the child's life. He might hate her for this, or he might be grateful to her, but in any case, the child would lead a very different life. She was not afraid of facing new challenges, but was afraid that geographical distance would weaken their friendship. Shing Ya had only sent two Christmas cards and one short letter all these years. She was worried that they would never be able to meet again, or if they did meet, would end up not having any common feeling or language, with nothing but a nationality gap between them.